

# Democracy Dies in Peru, But Few Seem to Mourn Its Passing

The "death of democracy" has not left much of a vacuum in Peru. It was more like the death of somebody's old uncle, whose name had been familiar in the household for years. But he died where he had always lived, in some far-off town the family never quite got around to visiting—although he had always meant to, or at least that's what they said.

If there is one profound reality in Peruvian politics, it is simply that the country has no democratic tradition. Any attempt to introduce one, furthermore, is going to meet violent opposition. The people who need democracy don't even know what the word means; the people who know what it means don't need it, and they don't mind saying so. If the Alliance for Progress requires democracy in Peru to become a fact instead of just a pleasant word, then the Alliance is in for rough sledding, too.

If the Peruvian people were as concerned about democracy as is President Kennedy, the country would be in the throes of a violent civil war. What happened in Lima on July 18 was more than enough to touch off armed conflict in many countries of the world. And it was confirmed on July 24, when the unelected government issued a decree-law, assuming all executive and legislative powers. The third largest country in South America thus passed officially into the hands of the military. The second largest, Argentina, had provided an easy-to-follow example some five months before.

When the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) won the Peruvian elections June 10, the military called the voting a "fraud," took over the government, annulled what many (including many United States sources) called the most honest and least fraudulent election in Peru's history, and installed a four-man military dictatorship.

## Life Goes on as Before

Yet life goes on in Lima as if nothing had happened. The evening streets are full of pretty girls and slick-haired men in business suits. The opulent shops that flank the trolleys on Avenida Pezuela are full of silver and alpaca and the soft rustle of money changing hands. And the all-night bars still sound as if their frenzied, disco-swalling patrons had abandoned hope of ever seeing another dawn.

The city is full of people, in fact, who say that what happened is precisely nothing at all. It is foolish, they say, to talk about the military junta "seizing the reins," because the junta is nothing more than a dress-uniform version of the same power bloc that has held the reins for centuries.

It is only in times of crisis that the poorer bloc puts on the jackboots and goes into the street with truncheons, in times of peace it wears muffs, and buses itself with other, less militant pursuits—primarily that of maintaining itself in the style to which it has long been accustomed. As old as the Incas, the power elite is called the Forty Families, an all-powerful aristocracy.

"That's what Kennedy doesn't understand," explained one Lima-based American businessman. "You just can't have democracy down here. The people don't understand it. United States Ambassador James Isaac Loeb was the same way. He went out to the futbol game and sat down in the grandstand with the common people—I saw him myself, with his

feet propped up on the rail and the top of his nose showing—why, they thought he was crazy. It was absolutely incomprehensible, even to the people he was trying to make friends with. If you want to get anywhere down here, you have to make people respect you."

From the beginning of their history, the Peruvian people have been conditioned to understand there are only two kinds of human beings—the Ins and the Outs, with a vast gulf in between. In a book called *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru*, you read that "The Inca state insured the people against hunger, exploitation, undue hardship, and all kinds of want, but regimented them rigorously and left them no choice, independence, or initiative. . . . There was a large class of nobles and priests, supported by the masses. Heavy tribute in the form of labor was demanded of the peasants, who profited very little from it."

## Centuries-Old Traditions

That was in 1438, and little has changed since then except that the peasants are no longer insured against hunger, exploitation, undue hardship, and all kinds of want. There is ample evidence of those conditions even in Lima, which differs from the rest of Peru much as Manhattan differs from the mountains of eastern Kentucky.

The strange assumption in Lima's business community—Americans and Peruvians alike—is that President Kennedy would join them in their endorsement of the system in Peru "if he could only understand it, and stop paying so much attention to Loeb."

The United States ambassador is undoubtedly the most second-guessed man in Peru. There is not a man at the Bankers' Club, among other places, who cannot tell you where he went wrong and exactly what he should have done instead. The most common criticism is that he



tried to force-feed democracy to a people who had no idea what he was talking about.

The nominal chief of the junta, Gen. Manuel Perez Godoy, has flatly called Mr. Loeb "an Aprista" (an APRA follower), which is like being called an enemy of the state. In business circles it is Loeb who draws most of the blame for the United States' refusal at first to recognize the junta. The general sentiment is that Mr. Kennedy was "mised." General Perez is of the same mind.

## An Impressive Orator

General Perez has impressed foreign journalists in Lima with his unique feeling for words and their fundamental meanings. He is an impressive orator, and in his first statement after the takeover he explained it this way: "We have seen a fraudulent electoral process in which not even the most basic and elementary rights of the citizens have been respected. The armed forces have been with pain, with anxiety, with tight lips, and dry eyes, this sacrifice of our people, of our country, of our future."

The fact that the armed forces had been able to dig up only 70 fraudulent ballots out of a total of some 2,000,000 did not deter General Perez from going on TV to amplify and reiterate his feelings.

This was a little hard for some people to take, notably those 600,000 or so humble and forgotten voters who had cast their ballots for APRA and Dr. Victor Raul Haya de la Torre.

It is hard, in fact, to find anyone who seriously believes the military took over because of "a great electoral fraud." The National Elections Board, a group of respected jurists with no ties to APRA, investigated the charges and found that, although there had been isolated cases of false registration and multiple voting, the sum of the infractions was far too small to have any effect on the outcome. President Manuel Prado agreed—and was exiled to Paris for his efforts when the military decided to back his charges with a Sherman tank and a United States-trained ranger battalion.

## New Elections Are Scheduled

The junta has scheduled new elections for June 9, 1963, but the only people in Lima who seem to believe it are tax drivers, hotel clerks, and a varied assortment of small jobholders—who voted for

Gen. Manuel Odría, dictator from 1948 to 1956. In the circle most heartily in agreement with the takeover—namely, the business and finance community—the betting is against elections next year. "These boys are in to stay," said the president of a United States businessmen's society. "Once they get the taste of sugar on their tongues they're not going to give it up."

Nor was he much alarmed by the prospect. "These people are like children," he explained. "They'll complain all day about discipline, but deep down they like it. They need it."

"Let's be smart about it," he added. "The rich people are running this country. Why not face facts and be thankful for what stability we have? These people are anti-Communist. Let's recognize the junta, keep the aid flowing, and get on with it."

Nearly everybody who wears a tie in Lima feels the same way. Business is good in Peru—it is the only South American country without a balance of payments deficit—and the vested interests want to keep it that way. Even the taxi driver, who is making a good living because there are enough people on the streets with money in their pockets, does not particularly care who sits in the presidential palace as long as they don't upset the apple cart.

This is what almost happened. APRA is more than just another political party; it is a genuine threat to a way of life that was 600 years old when the United States was born. To say that the takeover came simply because of the military's long-standing feud with APRA is to gloss over the fact that the entire ruling class in Peru regards APRA as more dangerous than communism. Communism has never been more than a minor threat in Peru, and is more a convenient whipping boy than anything else.

## The Main Threat to Status Quo

APRA, primarily because of its appeal to millions of voteless, illiterate Indians, is by long odds the main threat to Peru's status quo. At the moment, the party is still reeling from the jolt of having its hard-fought election victory annulled. When soldiers pulled out of the Casa del Pueblos (House of the People), which is APRA's headquarters, the place was a total wreck. On Aug. 7, after two weeks of occupation, it was returned to the party, and a vast, silent crowd was on hand to view the remains.

There were bullet holes in the walls and ceiling; doors and windows had been smashed and party records destroyed; and the entire building—nearly a city block of offices and facilities—was littered with glass, broken furniture, and water-soaked paper. Among the smashed or stolen items were the only dentist drill, all medicine from the clinic and drugs from the pharmacy, typewriters, a radio transmitter, all phonograph records, sculpture in the art workshop, instruments for the children's band, food and plates from the dining hall, and records from the credit union.

Those who passed through the Casa del Pueblos that night, in what seemed like a huge funeral procession, were filled with bitterness and defeat. They were anxious to know what the United States was going to do about the takeover.

APRA represents some 600,000 of Peru's 2,000,000 voters, plus a vast majority of the 53 per cent of the popula-



Hunter S. Thompson

American Popular Revolutionary Alliance party workers and children leaf through debris left in their office after soldiers of the Peruvian military junta ransacked the party's block-long building.

tion which neither reads, writes, nor votes. Haya de la Torre got 14,000 more votes than any other candidate, and in a democratic country a man who did that well could expect to have some say in the government.

In Peru, however, the will of the people is subject to the veto of the class that controls the army. To these people, democracy means chaos. A whole way of life would collapse if democracy became a reality in Peru.

The military takeover was a step taken with a full deliberation and plenty of warning. The military—and the oligarchy that supports the military—were, and still are, bound and determined not to let APRA get its hands on the throttle.

It could follow, then, that if the United States reaction to the takeover is a "misunderstanding," as General Perez has said, the whole Alliance for Progress is a misunderstanding, because the Alliance is based rather firmly on the assumption that progress will not come at the expense of democracy. Mr. Kennedy has said this over and over again, but it is a concept

that has not gained wide acceptance in Peru. Not among the people who count, anyway. —HUNTER S. THOMPSON, Lima.

## A Defense Contractor Fights Iowa State Tax

Can a state tax a company that makes defense materials for the United States Government?

Yes, says the Iowa State Tax Commission. It has imposed \$28,714 in sale and use taxes on construction material used by Mason and Hanger-Silas Mason Co., Inc. The company makes Hawk missile warheads for Uncle Sam.

No, answers Mason and Hanger. The firm last week took the case to an Iowa court. The company claims any tax would be passed on to the purchaser—Uncle Sam. This makes it a tax on the Federal Government, say the firm's lawyers, and, therefore, unconstitutional.



Hunter S. Thompson

A Peruvian policeman on duty at the Plaza San Martin in Lima, Peru.